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REPOA's research agenda is concerned with poverty and its alleviation. Our objectives are to:

- develop the research capacity in Tanzania;
- enhance stakeholders' knowledge of poverty issues and empower them to act;
- contribute to policy dialogue;
- support the monitoring of the implementation of poverty related policy;
- strengthen national and international poverty research networks, and forge linkages between research(ers) and users.

It is our conviction that research provides the means for the acquisition of knowledge necessary for improving the quality of welfare in Tanzania society.

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Common Mistakes and Problems in Research Proposal Writing

An Assessment of
Proposals for Research
Grants Submitted to
Research on Poverty
Alleviation REPOA
(Tanzania)

Idris S. Kikula
Martha A. S. Qorro

RESEARCH ON POVERTY
ALLEVIATION

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As part of the study, questionnaires were sent to a sample of the authors of the proposals that formed the basis of this work. The purpose of the questionnaire was to compare the reviewers' comments and the authors' perception of the problems. We thank those authors who completed and returned the questionnaires.

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November 2005

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a study titled '*Common mistakes and problems in proposal writing*.' The paper is based on proposals submitted to Research on Poverty Alleviation (REPOA), a non-governmental organisation based in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. REPOA is a long-term research institution that is committed to deepening the understanding of causes, extent, nature, rate of change and means of combating poverty in Tanzania.

Every year REPOA solicits proposals from prospective researchers through advertisements. The guidelines for proposal writing issued by REPOA cover mainly aspects of structure and content of the proposals. The analysis of the data for this report was geared at establishing the following aspects: the acceptance rate of proposals, factors that influenced rejection; problems that authors encountered in writing fundable proposals and the relative frequencies and nature of such problems.

After the preliminary screening, the REPOA secretariat appoints two to three experts in the proposed subject area to review each of the proposals. The reviewers use a rating instrument that contains fourteen items addressing issues related to the title, introduction, research problem, objectives and the like (see appendix 1). Based on the scoring in the rating instrument, the proposal is either accepted forthright, accepted with minor, or with major revisions, or is rejected outright. It is this rating instrument that provided the framework for this study.

Between 1995 and 2004 a total of 783 research proposals were submitted to REPOA. Out of these 450 (55%) proposals qualified for external review. Of the reviewed proposals, 117 (27%) received funding and subsequently the research was conducted. This study analysed a sample of 240 proposals.

Where there are gross contradictions between the two reviewers, a third opinion is sought before a decision is made. Where major revisions are recommended, usually this means a resubmission. Up to three re-submissions are acceptable, beyond that the author is asked to submit elsewhere or attempt a different topic.

The results of the review process are tabled at the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)¹ whose recommendations are submitted to the REPOA Board for final approval.

The outputs of the review process of proposals formed the working material of this study. The synthesis of results was made using tables and charts. Copies of the rating instrument used by the reviewers were used to identify and determine problems and their frequencies. Sets of reviewers' comments were collected from a randomly selected sample of 89 proposals (37% of proposals in the sample) to determine the nature of the problems as identified by the reviewers. Acceptance rates were analysed in relation to a number of factors.

¹ REPOA has a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) whose members are drawn from various groups of stakeholders including government, academia and private sector. The Board has a similar composition. As with most other boards, this is a policy organ that among other things approves recommendation made by TAC.

Acceptance Rates and Factors

The Overall Acceptance Rate

The general trend shows that, of the 240 proposals in the sample only 39 proposals or 16% were accepted forthright while 91 proposals (38%) were rejected outright. The rest had to be resubmitted after revising the content.

On a yearly basis the highest number of proposals accepted forthright was realised in 2003. In this particular year 13 out of 57 proposals (23%) were accepted forthright. Also in the period under study the proportion of proposals rejected outright seems to decrease gradually.

The findings show that although the rejection rate declined over the years, the acceptance rate did not rise for proposals that were accepted forthright; instead more proposals were being accepted with minor or with major revisions. This could be attributed to the experience gained over the years and the capacity building initiatives taken by REPOA and perhaps other institutions as well.

Acceptance Rate by Academic Qualification of Author(s)

Findings on the acceptance rate by qualifications of authors show that 342 authors submitted the 240 proposals in the sample. The qualifications of these authors whose proposals were included in the study sample were 121 Ph.D. holders (35%), 178 holders of Masters Degree (52%), and 43 holders of 'Basic' (undergraduate) Degree (13%).

The results further show that Ph.D. holders accounted for the highest acceptance rate in percentage (34%) in the category of proposals that were accepted with minor revisions, followed by Masters (32%), then by holders of Basic Degree (21%). In the category of proposals accepted with major revisions, Basic Degree holders accounted for the highest percentage (30%) followed by Ph.D. holders (23%) then by Masters (20%). In the category of proposals rejected outright Basic Degree holders accounted for the highest percentage (40%) followed by Masters (26%) and finally by Ph.D. holders (25%). The results show what might have been expected. Authors who had gone through the Ph.D. process seemed to be better equipped to write fundable proposals than those who had not.

Acceptance by Main Discipline

In order to identify the discipline with the relatively higher acceptance rate, proposal titles were conveniently grouped into two broad disciplines, namely: the natural sciences and the social sciences. Socio-political, economics and management related proposals were grouped under the social sciences. Social sciences accounted for higher submissions amounting to 192 (80%) proposals compared to the natural sciences, which had only 48 (20%) out of the total of 240 proposals in the sample. However, although the social sciences had higher number of proposals, the natural sciences seem to have had a higher acceptance rate in terms of percentage.

Acceptance Rate by Number of Authors

The influence of the number of authors of the proposal was also established. The assumption was that if there was more than one person working on a proposal this would result in better quality proposal. Findings from the study show that although single authors accounted for the highest number of submissions, it is the multiple authors who actually had the highest acceptance rate.

Acceptance Rate by of Authors' Place of Domicile

The authors' place of domicile as related to better access to literature and other resources was assessed, with Dar-es-Salaam and Morogoro were compared to other locations in the

country. The overall acceptance rate by place of domicile shows that 67% of the proposals analysed were by authors from Dar es Salaam and Morogoro, while 33% were by authors from other locations. The results also show that although Dar es Salaam and Morogoro authors made a higher number of submissions, it was those from other locations who had a higher rate of acceptance.

Identification of Problems in Proposal Writing

One of the main objectives of this study was to identify the most common problems in writing proposals submitted to REPOA. The results of the study are summarised below as follows:

The overall picture of the problems identified in the various aspects of proposal shows that the most outstandingly weak aspects in proposal writing include unsatisfactory sampling procedure (58%), stating of hypotheses that could not be tested (53%), using inappropriate methodology (51%) and inadequate literature review (50%).

Aspects rated as 'good' by reviewers included clarity of objectives, adequacy of title and quality of text. The last aspect came as a pleasant surprise to the authors of this report, because we had thought this was one of the problematic areas in proposal writing.

It can also be noted here that aspects such as appropriate methodology, hypotheses testability, data analysis techniques and sampling procedure are problematic aspects for proposal writers.

Reviewers tended to be less strict when using the standard rating instrument than when expressing themselves verbally through written comments. Nevertheless the results show the following:

Titles

71% of the titles were unsatisfactorily written. A small number of them did not reflect what was intended to be done. Some of the inadequate titles were broad and lacked focus because of being wordy and general. Only 29 % of the titles were adequately written.

Introducing the Proposal

The results show that 72% of the introductions to the proposals in the study sample were unsatisfactorily written. Most of them (49%) lacked clarity and focus. Some of them were muddled and used poor language. It is interesting to note that a few of them even included irrelevant information. Some of them used old and out of date data and references. There were cases where facts were misrepresented. Casual writing was also a problem. One reviewer remarked that an introduction had been written 'like a story'.

Problem Statements

Out of the sampled reviewer's reports only 16% of the proposals had a well-written problem statement. The rest had problems ranging from no problem statement, lack of clarity and articulation, lack of focus, to some of them being muddled while covering many issues. There were cases where the problem statements were not even relevant.

Importance and Relevance of Research Problem to REPOA Priorities

More than half of the proposals that were submitted to REPOA were important and relevant to REPOA's portfolio of research on poverty alleviation. This was expected because REPOA has poverty as a theme that runs across the various sectors. However, 47% of the submissions had problems with importance and relevance; they were either not relevant or not clearly stated.

Clarity in Stating the Objectives

Only a small percentage (29%) of the proposals submitted to REPOA clearly stated the objectives. The rest of the proposals either did not clearly state the objectives or they included many general objectives that tended to obscure the proposals.

Appropriateness/Adequacy of Literature Review

Most proposal writers did not take the literature review seriously; with only 14% of the authors adequately reviewing the appropriate literature. The biggest percentage (86%) of the authors faced the following problems: inadequacy of literature reviewed (39%), lacked focus (16%), did not review any literature at all (7%), and the rest had poor presentation of the reviews (9%).

Relevance of Hypotheses

The presentation of hypotheses faces serious problems; with only 18% of the authors adequately present relevant hypotheses. Eighty two percent (82%) of the documents face problems. The problems faced included inadequate presentation (2%), none presentation of the hypotheses (22%), presentation of irrelevant hypotheses (17%) and none presentation of clearly formulated hypotheses (41%). It is most apparent from the results that authors have problems in articulating comprehensible hypotheses.

Whether or not the Hypotheses are Testable

We noted above that 18% of the authors presented relevant hypotheses. It is most likely that the hypotheses that were found to be testable include mainly those that were found to be relevant.

Appropriateness of Methods and Research Instruments

The majority of the authors (73%) took the trouble to design appropriate methods. However, clarity in the presentation was found to be a major problem. In some cases appropriate methods were used but they were not clearly presented. There were some authors (23%), however, who presented inappropriate methodologies. A small but significant number of authors (5%) did not present the methods they were going to use.

Adequacy of Sampling Procedures

Only 12% of the documents presented satisfactorily explained sampling procedures. Half of the documents reviewed did not have a satisfactory explanation of the sampling procedures. Further more 9% did not even present the sampling procedures that were going to be used.

Appropriateness of Data Analysis Techniques

The majority (89%) of the proposals did not have acceptable data analysis techniques. Of these 22% were not appropriate, 46% were not clearly stated and 21% did not even attempt to state the data analysis techniques.

Quality of Text and Presentation

It is encouraging to note that 63% of the documents had acceptable quality of text and presentation. Poor text and presentation represented 34%, and 3% of the documents were submitted without being edited.

Omission of Critical Literature

37% of the reports adequately covered the critical literature. The rest (63%) omitted the critical literature. Most likely this could be due to lack of knowledge, non-availability of such literature, or lack of easy access to such literature.

Nature of Problems Based on Analysis of Questionnaire Responses Administered to a Sample of the Authors

The three most problematic aspects from the proposal writers' perspective were in stating the research problem, articulating the importance of research problem in accordance with REPOA's priorities and proposing appropriate of methodology. Other problems, in ascending order are listed in the main report.

Explanations for the problems identified include limited knowledge of proposal writing, inadequate instructions from REPOA on proposal writing, and a lack of understanding of the concept of poverty.

Readers are referred to the REPOA publication: *'Guidelines for Preparing Concept Notes and Proposals for Research on Pro-Poor Growth and Poverty in Tanzania'* Special Paper 7.23, Dar es Salaam, REPOA, which was prepared to address the issues raised in this report. Lecturers and researchers should find this document useful, it is available free from REPOA, or can be downloaded from our website: www.repoa.or.tz.

Introduction

This report presents the results of the study on '*Common mistakes and problems in proposal writing.*' The study was based on proposals submitted to Research on Poverty Alleviation (REPOA) for funding. REPOA is a Tanzanian non-governmental research organisation which has operated since 1994. REPOA's vision is premised on the conviction that research provides the means for the acquisition of knowledge and information that is vital for making informed decisions and developing policies necessary to improve the welfare of Tanzanian society. Arising from this vision, REPOA's mission is thus to deepen the understanding of the causes, extent, nature, rate of change and means of combating poverty among Tanzania's various stakeholders.

REPOA's research records indicate that between 1995 and 2004 a total of 783 research proposals were submitted, giving a yearly average of 78 proposals. Of these 450 (55%) proposals qualified for external review. Of the reviewed proposals, 117 (27%) received funding and subsequently research was conducted. This study analysed the acceptance rate of a sample of 240 proposals that were made available to the authors of this report by REPOA. The proposals analysed were submitted to REPOA between 2000 and 2004 as follows: 57 proposals from the year 2000; 24 proposals from the year 2001; 40 proposals from 2002; 57 proposals from 2003; and 62 proposals from the year 2004.

On the basis of these sampled proposals the study made an attempt first, to establish the acceptance rate of proposals and investigated factors influencing the quality of submissions. Secondly, to establish the problems that authors encountered in writing fundable proposals and the relative frequencies of such problems; and thirdly, to establish the nature of the problems that the authors of those proposals faced.

This work was stimulated by observations made by one of the authors of this report during the review of many proposals submitted to REPOA for funding. It was noticed that many mistakes seemed to re-occur. Similarly, there seemed to be a re-occurrence of similar mistakes in research reports written after some of the proposals had been approved for funding.

The authors' experience of supervising students' work for many years at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels also showed that students encountered the same problems. It should not be surprising, therefore, that those students who for one reason or another do not benefit from a rigorous training on proposal and report writing encounter the same problems even long after they had graduated. Therefore, it was considered important to systematically study the various submissions to REPOA in order to identify and describe the common mistakes in proposal and report writing. This study aims to help both students and practitioners who may need guidance in proposal writing.

This work is being undertaken while acknowledging that Cooksey and Likwelile (2002) had previously been commissioned by REPOA to develop some guidelines for preparing research proposals on poverty research in Tanzania. The report was an update of the 1995 Special Paper Number 9 prepared by Cooksey and the REPOA secretariat. Guidelines for

proposal writing came out as REPOA Special Research Paper Number 15. Thus this study is the third intervention by REPOA to advance the issue of research quality.

In order to appreciate the logic of such a sequential intervention by REPOA, let us briefly review some previous work and link it with this report. The first part of the report by Cooksey and Likwelile (2002) dwelt on the status by then, of knowledge on poverty in Tanzania. This part covered aspects of poverty and public policy, linkages between poverty and environment, technology and poverty alleviation, gender and poverty alleviation and social-cultural determinants of poverty. This part of their report served a useful function of providing a firm grounding for potential researchers on some of the basic concepts related to poverty.

The second part (7 pages) of the Cooksey and Likwelile report (2002) provided guidelines on how to prepare the different components of a proposal. It provides useful hints on the expected contents of the abstracts, introductions, research problem, objectives, theoretical background, and literature review. It also provided useful hints on formulating hypotheses and writing the methodology.

This study expands upon the 2002 research and continues REPOA's efforts to improve research quality. What this report does is to investigate the extent to which the guidelines thus provided by REPOA are being used by the prospective researchers. It does this, first, by analysing the acceptance rate of the proposals submitted to REPOA. It goes further by investigating on some possible factors that could be contributing to the quality of the submissions. Furthermore, the report critically examines the problems faced by the authors of proposals and reports. In other words this report looks at how seriously the prospective researchers use the provided guidelines.

This analysis covers 13 aspects of proposal writing which are evaluated by REPOA when proposals are assessed for funding (see Appendix 1) ranging from the title to the adequacy or otherwise of the bibliographical coverage, as well as contribution of the proposed research to the to the capacity building of junior researchers. The capacity building component is a factor taken into account when evaluating the merit of the proposed research.

The analysis of data based on the reviewers' assessments was complemented by the views of the researchers whose projects had been previously accepted for funding by REPOA. These views were solicited by using a survey questionnaire. This report then determines the nature of the problem for each of the aspects assessed and suggests the way forward. These suggestions combine the views from the authors of proposals in the sample and from the authors of this report.

Readers are referred to the REPOA publication: '*Guidelines for Preparing Concept Notes and Proposals for Research on Pro-Poor Growth and Poverty in Tanzania*' Special Paper 7.23, Dar es Salaam, REPOA which was prepared to address the issues raised in this report. Lecturers and researchers should find this document useful, it is available free from REPOA, or can be downloaded from our website: www.repoa.or.tz.

Methodology

The REPOA “rating instrument” (see Appendix 1)² for proposals provided the framework of the study. Therefore, it may be useful at this juncture therefore to briefly describe the system used by REPOA to assess proposals and reports so that the methodology used in this study is put into context.

The REPOA proposal approval process consists of several stages. Every year REPOA publicly solicits through advertising proposals from prospective researchers on poverty related issues (social, political, economical and aspects of natural resources and environment).

REPOA does have general guidelines on proposal writing³ mentioned earlier, which mainly cover mainly aspects of the structure and content of the proposals. These guidelines, as would be expected, do not go into the depth of technical details as we cover in this report. As such, the proposal writing at the detailed technical level is unguided by REPOA. It had been assumed that at their level of qualification, proposal authors would have acquired the skills of proposal/report writing or would know where to look for guidance when necessary and they would prepare a technically sound proposal for submission. Unfortunately this has not always been the case.

After the proposal has been submitted to REPOA, it is subjected to a review process where the REPOA secretariat appoints two experts to review it. Reviewers are appointed on the basis of their technical competence on the subject matter being addressed in the proposal. The reviewers use the proposal rating instrument mentioned above as a guide. Based on the scoring in the rating instrument, the proposal is either accepted outright, accepted with minor, or with major revisions, or is rejected outright. Where there are significant contradictions between the two reviewers, a third opinion is sought before a decision is made. Where major revisions are recommended, usually this means a resubmission of the revised proposal. In this case, usually the same reviewers are asked to re-evaluate the re-submitted proposal before it is passed through the approval process once again. Up to three re-submissions are acceptable, beyond that the author is asked to submit their proposal elsewhere, or attempt a different topic.

The results of the review process are compiled by the secretariat and tabled at meeting of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)⁴ whose recommendations are submitted to the REPOA Board of Directors for final approval.

The resulting research reports from the funded proposals also go through a review process before being submitted to the approval organs i.e. the TAC and the Board. Normally the same

² This instrument has been gradually improved through the years. The latest development has been the guidance of decision making by the reviewer i.e. deciding on whether or not the proposal is approved and the condition attached to that decision (outright approval, approval with major, minor corrections) or rejection.

³ Brian Cooksey and Servacius Likwelile (2002).

⁴ REPOA has a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) whose members are drawn from various groups of stakeholders including government, academia and private sector. The Board of Directors has a similar composition. As with most other boards, this is a policy organ that among other duties approves recommendation made by the TAC.

people who reviewed the work at the proposal stage are asked to review the reports. There is no rating instrument for the review of reports. However, the reviewer is required to examine and provide comments on the clarity of the problem statement, clarity of objectives, comprehensiveness of literature review, clarity and appropriateness of hypotheses, clarity and appropriateness of methodology and comprehensiveness of analysis of the research findings. The details of the individual assessments are left in the hands of the reviewers. The results of the review are sent back to the author(s), though the identity of every reviewer is kept confidential. Recommendations range from minor corrections related to grammar, facts, etc. to major re-writing or re-structuring of the report.

The outputs of the described review process of both proposals and reports formed the working material of this study. The syntheses of results are presented using tables and charts. As mentioned earlier the data available covered the period 2000 to 2004. Copies of the rating instrument used by the reviewers in assessing proposals were also used to identify and determine problems that were encountered by proposal authors and the frequency of the identified problems. Sets of reviewers' comments on research reports were also collected from a randomly selected sample of 89 proposals (37% of the 240 proposals in the sample) to determine the detailed nature of the problems as identified by the reviewers.

The first set of analysis sought to establish the overall rate of acceptance for proposals. Further analysis was then conducted to establish the rate of acceptance in relation to four specific factors considered to contribute towards the quality of proposals.

The first factor analysed was the academic qualification of the author(s). In this case the qualifications were Ph.D., Masters, Basic Degree and none degree. Acceptance rate for the proposals received from authors with the above qualifications were tallied to find out which group had the highest rate of acceptance in terms of numbers and percentages.

The main discipline of study was another factor taken into consideration. The aim was to find out if the main discipline or area of study influenced the acceptance rate. To achieve this aim, proposals in the sample were conveniently grouped into two broad disciplines, the natural sciences and the social sciences. Socio-political, economics and management related proposals were grouped under social science. The acceptance rate was then calculated for the proposals in the two broad disciplines to determine which discipline had the higher rate of acceptance in terms of numbers and percentages.

The third factor analysed was the number of authors of individual proposals. The researchers wanted to determine whether the number of authors per proposal had a bearing on the acceptance rate of proposals/reports. We assumed that if more than one person worked on a proposal then this would result in better quality. To achieve this objective we tallied proposals according to the number of authors for each proposal in the sample; i.e. single author, two authors, or more than two authors (multiple authors). Acceptance rates (in numbers and percentages) were calculated.

The authors' place of domicile was another factor considered in the analysis of acceptance rate. The aim was to determine whether or not the place of domicile had an impact on the acceptance rate of proposals. It was assumed that researchers in Dar-es-Salaam and Morogoro had better access to literature and other resources than those living up-country. To achieve this aim two main places of domicile (near Dar-es-Salaam and Morogoro or up-country) were identified and proposals were grouped accordingly. Acceptance rate was tallied for each group to find out which had the highest rate in terms of numbers and percentages. Findings on the acceptance rate of proposals are presented (and discussed) in Section 3.5 of this report.

The analysis outlined above was followed by identification of the most prevailing problems. The aim was to find out the most commonly occurring problems in the proposals submitted to REPOA. This was done using the rating instrument designed and used by REPOA's reviewers to assess the quality of proposals. Researchers compiled the rates assigned to the various aspects of each proposal from the sample. The outcome of this compilation was tables consisting of the various aspects of proposals against the rates assigned (0 = very weak, 1 = quite weak, 2 = average, 3 = quite good, 4 = very good) and their frequencies. Using these tables, we could identify the most frequent problems in proposal writing. Results are presented and discussed in Section 4.0 of this report

The final objective of the study was to determine the nature of the problems affecting proposals. To achieve this, a random sample of 89 proposals was selected from the 240 proposals in the major sample. The sets of reviewers' comments on each aspect of the selected 89 proposals were systematically extracted and recorded. This qualitative data yielded reviewers' impressions/comments on the types and nature of problems that authors encountered when writing proposals. The findings on the nature of these problems are discussed in Section 4.3 of this report.

A questionnaire (see Appendix 2) was designed by researchers as an additional research instrument to the rating instrument that had been designed by REPOA. The aim of the questionnaire was to elicit views of proposal writers on the most problematic aspects of proposal writing, the nature of those problems and ways to improve performance for each of the aspects identified. The intention was to find out whether authors were aware of the problems and whether their responses coincided with the findings from analysis of the rating instrument completed by reviewers and with other results of this study. In this way, views of the authors of proposals were used to crosscheck the findings of the study.

Assessment of Proposals Submitted to Repoa

This section examines the acceptance rate for proposals submitted to REPOA in relation to different factors. These include the academic qualifications of author(s), main discipline/area of research, number of authors for each proposal, and authors' place of domicile. But first, let us look at the overall acceptance rate for proposals.

3.1 Identification of the Overall Acceptance Rate

As noted in Chapter 1, a total of 783 proposals were submitted to REPOA between 1995 and 2004; and of these only 27% were accepted (REPOA, 2005), and received funding. In identifying the overall acceptance rate the aim of the study was to establish and to compare the rate and trend of acceptance over the years. To achieve this aim the acceptance rate for each year was tallied and compared across the years as shown in Table 1 below. The general trend in Table 1 shows that, of the 240 proposals in the sample only 39 proposals or 16% were accepted outright, while 91 proposals (38%) were rejected outright. The rest had to be resubmitted.

Table 1: Overall Acceptance Rate between 2000 and 2004

Category	Number	%
Proposals accepted outright	39	16
Proposals accepted with minor revisions	59	25
Proposals accepted with major revisions	51	21
Proposals rejected	91	38
Total proposals analysed	240	100

The overall acceptance rates for each year were then calculated to compare the rates between years and to see if any trend existed. To achieve this, proposals accepted and rejected in each year were tallied and rates of acceptance calculated. This is shown in Table 2 below. On a yearly basis the highest number of proposals accepted outright was realised in the year 2003, with 13 out of 57 proposals (23%) accepted outright during that year.

Table 2: Overall Acceptance Rate of Proposals Submitted to REPOA from 2000 to 2004

Proposals	2000		2001		2002		2003		2004		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%								
Accepted Outright	11	19	3	13	8	20	13	23	4	7	39	16
Accepted With Minor Revisions	4	7	5	21	7	18	20	35	23	37	59	25
Accepted with Major Revisions	5	9	3	13	6	15	15	26	22	35	51	21
Rejected	37	65	13	53	19	47	9	16	13	21	91	38
Total Proposals	57	100	24	100	40	100	57	100	62	100	240	100

The noteworthy yearly trend is that the percentage of proposals rejected outright seems to have decreased over the years. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the proposals analysed from 2000, i.e. 37 out of 57 were rejected outright. This percentage declined to 53% in 2001, to 47% in 2002, and to 16% and 21 in 2003 and 2004 respectively. However, this decline in the percentage of rejected proposals does not mean that there was a rise in the number of proposals that were accepted outright. Results show that the percentage of proposals accepted outright fluctuated over the five years. However, the percentage of proposals that were accepted with minor revisions and those that were accepted with major revisions rose as the years progressed. For example, 9% of all proposals analysed from 2000 were accepted with major revisions. This figure rose to 13% of proposals in 2001, then to 15% in 2002; in 2003 it was 26% while in 2004 it further rose to 35% of all proposals analysed for that year. The same trend of acceptance rate was repeated for proposals accepted with minor revisions.

To sum up, findings for this particular aspect show that although the rejection rate declined over the period, the acceptance rate for proposals that were accepted outright rate did not rise. However, more proposals were being accepted with minor and major revisions. A possible interpretation of these trends is that the authors of proposals were becoming more competent in proposal writing over the years. This, in turn, could be attributed to the personal experience gained by authors over the years and to capacity building initiatives offered by REPOA and other institutions. Having identified the overall acceptance rate the subsequent sections will link the acceptance rate to different factors, starting with academic qualifications of the author(s).

3.2 Acceptance Rate by Academic Qualification of Author(s)

The aim here was to find out the extent to which authors' qualifications had a bearing on the acceptance rate of proposals submitted to REPOA. To achieve this aim, proposals in the sample were categorised and tallied on the basis of the author's qualification. The 240 proposals were written by 342 authors; and of these authors, 121 held Ph.D.'s (35%), 178 held Masters degrees (53%), and 43 held basic degrees (13%).

The trend of acceptance rates for each category is shown in Table 3 below, which indicates that of the 121 Ph.D. holders 20 (16%) had their proposals accepted outright; of the 178 holders of Masters Degree 40 (22%) had their proposals accepted outright; while for Basic Degree holders only 4 (9%) had their proposals accepted outright. Therefore, authors with Masters Degree had the highest percentage of proposals accepted outright.

Table 3: Overall Acceptance Rate by Qualification of Authors

Category	Ph.D.		Masters		Basic Degree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Accepted Outright	20	16	40	22	4	9
Accepted with Minor Revisions	42	34	56	32	9	21
Accepted with Major Revisions	28	23	35	20	13	30
Rejected	31	25	47	26	17	40
Total Analysed	121	100	178	100	43	100

Table 3 further shows that Ph.D. holders accounted for the highest acceptance rate in percentage (34%) for proposals that were accepted with minor revisions, followed by authors with Masters (32%), then by holders of Basic Degrees (21%). In the category of proposals accepted with major revisions, Basic Degree holders accounted for the highest percentage (30%) followed by Ph.D. holders (23%) then by authors with Masters (20%). Finally, for

proposals rejected outright Basic Degree holders again accounted for the highest percentage (40%), followed by Masters (26%) and finally by Ph.D. holders (2%). These results show what might have been expected. Authors who have gone through the process of obtaining a Ph.D. seemed to be better equipped to write fundable proposals than those with lower qualifications.

Table 4 below gives a detailed picture of the rate of acceptance by authors' qualifications for proposals for each year. In this case the number of proposals for each author category was tallied, not the total number of authors as in Table 3.

Table 4: Acceptance Rate (in number of proposals) by Qualification of Authors for Each Year

		2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Proposals Accepted Outright	PhD	4	0	1	4	1
	Masters	6	2	7	7	3
	Basic Degree	1	1	0	2	0
Proposals Accepted with Minor Revisions	PhD	2	2	1	4	13
	Masters	2	3	6	14	8
	Basic Degree	0	1	0	2	2
Proposals Accepted with Major Revisions	PhD	2	0	0	5	8
	Masters	2	3	6	3	12
	Basic Degree	2	0	0	7	2
Proposals Rejected	PhD	12	2	3	7	3
	Masters	20	9	15	2	4
	Basic Degree	4	1	0	0	6
Proposals Analysed	PhD	20	4	5	20	25
	Masters	30	17	34	26	27
	Basic Degree	7	3	0	11	10

Note: there was one professor who submitted a proposal in 2004, this data is excluded from this table. The proposal was rejected.

Table 4 also illustrates that more proposals from the sample were accepted with minor and major revisions, especially during the last two years, compared with the initial year under study. In 2000 a total of 36 proposals were rejected, while in 2004 only 13 proposals were rejected outright.

Table 4 further shows that although authors with Masters Degree had the highest number of submissions, in terms of percentage Ph.D. holders had the highest rate of acceptance. For example, in the year 2000 there were 30 holders of Masters Degree in the sample who submitted proposals out of which 20 authors had their proposals rejected, this means an acceptance rate of 34%. In the same year Ph.D. holders submitted 20 proposals out of which 12 were rejected, this means an acceptance rate of 40%.

To sum up, the findings in this area show that although holders of Masters accounted for the highest number of proposals submitted to REPOA in the period under study, it was in fact the Ph.D. holders who accounted for the highest percent of proposals accepted overall.

3.3 Acceptance Rate by Main Discipline

The acceptance rate for proposals submitted to REPOA, relative to the area of research is examined in this section. To achieve this objective, proposals were categorised into two main

disciplines, the natural sciences and the social sciences. Table 5 below shows the overall acceptance rates by main discipline for the five years under study.

It can be observed from Table 5 that social sciences accounted for a much higher number of submissions - 192 or 80% of proposals - compared with the natural sciences, which had only 48 submissions or 20% of the total proposals in the sample. However, although the social sciences had higher number of proposals, the natural sciences had a higher acceptance rate in terms of percentage. For example, of the 192 social science proposals only 29 (15%) were accepted outright, while of the 48 natural science proposals 12 proposals (25%) were accepted outright.

Table 5: Acceptance by Main Discipline by Year

		2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Proposals Accepted Outright	Natural Sciences	2	2	3	5	0
	Social Sciences	9	1	5	8	6
Proposals Accepted with Minor Revisions	Natural Sciences	1	1	5	4	4
	Social Sciences	3	3	7	16	19
Proposals Accepted with Major Revisions	Natural Sciences	1	1	2	2	1
	Social Sciences	4	5	3	14	20
Proposals Rejected	Natural Sciences	6	1	4	1	2
	Social Sciences	31	10	11	7	10
Proposals Analysed	Natural Sciences	10	5	14	12	7
	Social Sciences	47	19	26	45	55

To sum up, findings in this aspect of study show that although the social sciences accounted for higher numbers of proposals submitted to REPOA, it is the natural sciences that had a higher acceptance rate in terms of percentage. It is difficult to speculate any reason for this.

3.4 Acceptance Rate by Number of Authors

The third factor studied was the acceptance rates of proposals by the number of authors who prepared them. The aim in this case was to find out if the number of authors working on a single proposal had a bearing on the acceptance rate. Proposals were categorised into three groups, namely: single author, two authors, and multiple authors, and the acceptance rate was examined in relation to each category. The results on overall acceptance rates are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Overall Acceptance Rate by Number of Authors

Category	Single Authors		Two Authors		Multiple Authors	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Proposals Accepted Outright	20	21	11	14	8	13
Accepted with Minor Revisions	18	19	22	27	18	29
Accepted with Major Revisions	23	24	16	20	15	24
Proposals Rejected	36	36	32	39	21	34
Proposals Analysed	97	100	81	100	62	100

The overall picture presented in Table 6 shows that single authors submitted the highest number of proposals and had the highest percentage of proposals accepted outright. In the period under study single authors submitted 97 proposals, teams of two authors

submitted 81 proposals, while teams with multiple authors submitted 62 proposals. Percentages of proposals accepted outright were 21% for single authors, 14% for two authors' category and 13% for the multiple authors' category. However, the multiple authors' category had the highest acceptance rates overall for both proposals accepted with minor revisions and those accepted with major revisions, and the highest acceptance rate overall.

Calculations for each year are recorded in Table 7 below. In 2000, 2001, and 2002 single authors submitted the highest number of proposals (32, 10, and 20 respectively) followed by the two authors' category with 15, 9 and 15 respectively; while the multiple authors' category submitted the lowest number (10, 5 and 5 respectively). This trend changed in 2003 where the highest number of proposals was submitted by teams of two authors (23 proposals) followed by single author (18 proposals) while closely followed by teams with multiple authors (16 proposals). In 2004, the trend changed again; the multiple authors' category submitted the highest number (26 proposals), followed by the two authors' category with 19 proposals while the single author category submitted the lowest number with 17 proposals.

Table 7: Acceptance Rate by Number of Authors by Year

	Number of Authors	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Proposals Accepted Outright	Single	6	1	6	6	1
	Two	1	1	2	6	1
	Multiple	4	1	0	1	2
Proposals Accepted with Minor Revisions	Single	2	2	3	7	4
	Two	2	2	2	8	8
	Multiple	0	0	2	5	11
Proposals Accepted with Major Revisions	Single	3	2	6	2	10
	Two	1	2	0	6	7
	Multiple	1	2	0	7	5
Proposals Rejected	Single	21	5	5	3	2
	Two	11	4	11	3	3
	Multiple	5	2	3	3	8
Total Analysed	Single	32	10	20	18	17
	Two	15	9	15	23	19
	Multiples	10	5	5	16	26

Findings from this aspect of the study shows that although single authors accounted for the highest number of submissions it is the multiple authors who actually recorded the highest acceptance rate.

3.5 Acceptance Rate by of Authors' Place of Domicile

The aim in this case was to find out if the place of domicile of authors had a bearing on the proposal acceptance rate. The assumption here was that authors based in Dar es Salaam and Morogoro had better access to resources in terms of literature (hard copies and the Internet) and greater exposure to knowledgeable people for consultations. To achieve this objective, proposals were categorised into two groups, namely: authors from Dar es Salaam and Morogoro and authors from up-country. Then the acceptance rate was examined in relation to each group. The results on the overall acceptance rate are given in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Overall Acceptance Rate by Authors' Place of Domicile

Category	Dar es Salaam and Morogoro		Up-country	
	No.	%	No.	%
Proposals Accepted Outright	22	14	17	21
Accepted with Minor Revisions	38	23	14	18
Accepted with Major Revisions	32	20	19	24
Proposals Rejected	69	43	29	37
Total Analysed	161	67	79	33

The overall acceptance rate by place of domicile shows that 67% of the proposals analysed were written by authors from Dar es Salaam M and Morogoro, while 33% were submitted by authors from up-country. Table 8 also shows that although Dar es Salaam and Morogoro authors had a higher number of submissions it was the up-country authors who had a higher rate of acceptance. For example, the sample had 161 proposals from Dar es Salaam and Morogoro, of which only 14% were accepted outright; while 21% of the 79 proposals by up-country authors were accepted outright.

The overall acceptance rate of 57% for Dar es Salaam/Morogoro and 63% for up-country authors were deduced from the percentage of rejected proposals (43% for Dar es Salaam/Morogoro and 37% for up-country authors respectively). The reason why up-country authors do slightly better than their DSM and Morogoro counterparts is difficult to determine.

The yearly trend of acceptance rate by authors' place of domicile is shown in Table 9 below. Table 9 indicates that the rate of acceptance was initially very low but tended to pick up over the years. For example, from the proposals in the sample for the year 2000, 36 were by authors from Dar es Salaam and Morogoro; out of these 12 proposals were accepted and 24 proposals were rejected outright. In the same year 8 out of 21 proposals by up-country authors were accepted and 13 proposals rejected outright.

Table 9: Acceptance Rate by Place of Domicile by Year

		2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Proposals Accepted Outright	Dar es Salaam & Morogoro	7	0	4	8	3
	Up-country	4	3	4	5	1
Proposals Accepted with Minor Revisions	Dar es Salaam & Morogoro	3	3	5	7	20
	Up-country	1	2	2	6	3
Proposals Accepted with Major Revisions	Dar es Salaam & Morogoro	2	2	1	10	17
	Up-country	3	1	5	5	5
Proposals Rejected	Dar es Salaam & Morogoro	24	10	12	15	8
	Up-country	13	3	7	1	5
Total Analysed	Dar es Salaam & Morogoro	36	15	22	40	48
	Up-country	21	9	18	17	14

To sum up, findings in this aspect of the study show that although authors from Dar es Salaam and Morogoro submitted a higher number of proposals it is authors from up-country who accounted for a higher acceptance rate.

Having identified the acceptance rate of proposals submitted to REPOA in relation to the different factors described above, the study proceeded to examine the problems proposal writers encountered. We wanted to establish the reasons that lead to outright rejection of proposals or to conditional acceptance.

4

Identification of Problems in Proposal Writing

4.1 The Context

One of the main objectives of this study was to identify the most common problems in writing proposals submitted to REPOA. To identify these problems we used two approaches. First, the rating instrument was analysed. The rating instrument was designed by REPOA and is used to guide reviewers when they are evaluating proposals. The rating instrument focused on 14 various aspects of the proposals and enabled reviewers to rate each aspect on a scale ranging from 0 (very weak) to 4 (very good). Using this rating instrument the authors of this report compiled the rates assigned to, and the problems identified for each aspect of the proposals in the sample. The second complementary approach was the analysis of responses by a sample of proposal writers.

The second and complementary approach was the analysis of survey questionnaires completed by a sample of proposal writers. As mentioned in the methodology section, the questionnaire approach was intended to find out whether there were similarities between the problems pointed out by the reviewers, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the problems identified by the authors of the proposals contained in the sample. The results of the data analysis based on these two approaches are presented in this section of the report.

4.2 Results of Reviewers' Assessments using the Rating Instrument

After the analysis was completed it was possible to determine the common problems in the order of their magnitude. The overall picture of the problems identified in the various aspects of proposal writing is given in Table 10 below. It can be seen that the weaker aspects in proposal writing were unsatisfactory sampling procedure (58%), hypotheses that could not be tested (53%), inappropriate methodology (51%) and inadequate literature review (50%).

Table 10: Aspects of Proposals Rated as 'Weak'⁵ by Reviewers (In Order of Weakness⁶)

	Criteria	Frequency
1	Is the sampling procedure satisfactory?	58
2	Is hypothesis testable?	53
3	Is methodology appropriate?	51
4	Is the literature review appropriate/adequate?	50
5	Is/are the data analysis techniques adequate?	46
6	Is/are the hypothesis(es) relevant?	47
7	Does the introduction provide justification?	42
8	Is the problem clearly presented?	41
9	Contribution to capacity building of juniors	37
10	Is the title adequate?	29
11	Quality of text and presentation	29
12	Is/are the objectives clear?	28
13	Is problem relevant to REPOA priorities?	13
14	Does the bibliography omit any vital reference?	12

⁵ 'Weak' refers to ratings of 0 and 1 given by reviewers for the sampled proposals (see Appendix 1).

⁶ The higher the mean the 'weaker' the author in that aspect.

Analysis was also conducted on aspects that were rated “good” by reviewers. The results are given in Table 11 below. It is clear from the table that the aspects rated as “good” included clarity of objectives, adequacy of title and quality of text. The last aspect came as a pleasant surprise to the authors of this report because it had been thought this was one of the problematic areas of proposal writing.

Table 11: Aspects of Proposals Rated as 'Good'⁷ by Reviewers

	Criteria	Frequency
1	Is/are the objectives clear?	110
2	Is the title adequate?	104
3	Quality of text and presentation	101
4	Does the introduction provide justification?	95
5	Is/are the data analysis techniques adequate?	93
6	Is/are the hypothesis(es) relevant?	93
7	Is the problem clearly presented?	92
8	Is methodology appropriate?	90
9	Is the problem relevant to REPOA priorities?	89
10	Contribution to capacity building of juniors	88
11	Is the sampling procedure satisfactory?	87
12	Is the literature review appropriate/adequate?	87
13	Is hypothesis testable?	86
14	Does the bibliography omit any vital reference?	50

Table 12 below gives, in descending order, those aspects rated as “very good” by reviewers. These aspects included relevance of research problems to REPOA priorities, the justification of research in the introduction, justification for the research problem, clear presentation of the problem and clear presentation of the objectives. In Table 12 the column 'frequency' refers to the total recurrences (frequency) of reviewers' comments on each of the aspect of proposals in the sample they reviewed. The other aspects that are rated “very good” in the rating instrument are also given in Table 12 below. Aspects such as appropriate methodology, hypotheses testability, data analysis techniques and sampling procedures recorded low frequencies implying that these aspects were problematic aspects for proposal writers.

Table 12: Aspects of Proposals Rated as 'Very Good'⁸ by Reviewers

	Criteria	Frequency
1	Is the problem relevant to REPOA priorities?	128
2	Does the introduction provide justification?	51
3	Is the problem clearly presented?	43
4	Is/are the objectives clear?	43
5	Is the title adequate?	41
6	Quality of text and presentation	41
7	Contribution to capacity building of juniors	37
8	Is the literature review appropriate/adequate?	30
9	Is/are the hypothesis(es) relevant?	21

⁷ 'Good' refers to rating of 3 given by reviewers for the sampled proposals (see Appendix 1).

⁸ 'Very Good' refers to rating of 4 given by reviewers for the sampled proposals (see Appendix 1).

10	Does the bibliography omit any vital reference?	21
11	Is the sampling procedure satisfactory?	20
12	Is/are the data analysis techniques adequate?	20
13	Is the hypothesis testable?	17
14	Is the methodology appropriate?	16

4.3 The Nature of the Problems from the Reviewers' Perspective

To examine the nature of problems in proposals, for each aspect we randomly selected sets of comments by individual reviewers for 89 proposals. Reviewers' comments were then systematically extracted and compiled in accordance with the aspects included in the proposal-rating instrument. Where the interpretation of comments proved difficult they were omitted. Results were tabulated according to specific categories and the percentage of each category worked out.

Discrepancies were noted between the reviewers' ratings as given in Tables 10, 11, and 12, and their written comments as illustrated in this section. It appeared that reviewers were less strict when using the rating instrument than when expressing themselves in their written commentary. However, what is important here is to note the nature of the problems as indicated by the reviewers. This section details those shortcomings for all aspects of proposal writing. Many of these problems were expected given the results shown in Tables 10, 11, and 12.

4.3.1 Title

The title must give the reader an immediate impression of what is to be expected in the document. The title of a research study must be as short and as clear as possible, but sufficiently descriptive of the nature of the work. The title is a "package" encapsulating many aspects of the research.

The research study must then be "unpacked" carefully, systematically and scientifically. The unpacking of the research title is the whole essence of proposal writing. How does one unpack the research title? This is achieved throughout the document. It starts with the introduction then on through the problem statement, objectives, hypotheses, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion. A common thread must link all the aspects of the proposal, so that the research argument is built systematically and gradually in the different sections.

Table 13 below gives the reviewers' impressions on the nature of problems as related to the formulation of the titles of proposals and reports. The results show that 71% of the titles were unsatisfactorily written. Some were unclear while others were long and clumsy. A small number of titles did not reflect what was intended to be done during the research. Some of the inadequate titles were too wordy and lacked focus. Only 29% of the titles were adequately written.

Table 13: Reviewers' Impressions⁹ on the Nature of Problems Related to Titles

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Adequate	29
Unclear	37
Long and clumsy	28
Differs to the contents	6

⁹ Samples of reviewers' comments of all proposals analysed were systematically extracted and compiled in accordance with the elements of the proposal-rating instrument. Where the interpretation of the comments proved difficult they were omitted. The results tabulated according to specific categories and the percentage of each category worked out.

4.3.2 Introducing the Proposal

The introduction of a proposal introduces to the reader the document and gives the readers their first impression of a proposal. It is important that this first impression is positive, otherwise a reader may have a negative bias towards the entire document. Reviewers' comments on introductions varied immensely. The comments were synthesized and the outcome is given in Table 14 below.

Table 14 shows that 72% of the introductions to the proposals in the study sample were unsatisfactorily written. Nearly half (49%) lacked clarity and focus. Some were muddled and used poor language. It is interesting to note that a few of them even included irrelevant information, while others used old and out-of-date data and references. There were cases where facts were misrepresented. Casual writing was also a problem. One reviewer remarked that an introduction had been written 'like a story'.

Table 14: Reviewers' Impressions on the Nature of Problems Related to Introductions

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Satisfactory	28
Unclear and unfocused	49
Irrelevant	8
Muddled and poor language	15

Many researchers deceive themselves by thinking that they can write a proper introduction without having reviewed the most critical literature on their research topic. The introduction needs to include a brief and concise statement on the intended research. Following this statement, the introduction must state what is generally known about the research topic. This basically is the conclusion of the author from a thorough survey of the current state of the knowledge on the subject. This survey must also identify a knowledge gap and how the proposed research intends to reduce the gap and contribute to the advancement of knowledge on the chosen topic. Identification of a knowledge gap justifies the research proposed. Without this justification a study may be viewed as research undertaken just for the sake of researchers.

4.3.3 Problem Statement

The problem statement is the centrepiece of a proposal as well as a report. Thus the statement of the problem must be clear, brief and succinct. Results of this study show serious problems with writing the problem statement. Synthesis of the reviewers' comments revealed the kinds of problems faced by authors in stating the problem statement, and these are summarized in Table 15 below:

From the sampled reviewer's reports, this table shows that only 16% of proposals had a well-written problem statement. The rest had problems ranging from no problem statement, lack of clarity and articulation, and lack of focus. Others were muddled by attempting to cover many issues. There were also cases where the problem statement was not even relevant.

Table 15: Reviewers' Impressions on Problems Related to Writing of Problem Statements

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Well stated	16
Not stated	11
Not clearly articulated	55
Not focused	10
Muddled	8

4.3.4 Importance and Relevance of Research Problem to REPOA Priorities

Reviewers' comments were next examined to reveal whether research problems were important and relevant to REPOA priorities. Table 16 shows that over half of the proposals submitted to REPOA were important and relevant. This was an expected outcome given that the scope of REPOA's research into poverty runs across various sectors. However, 47% of the submissions were either not relevant to REPOA priorities or not clearly stated.

Table 16: Reviewers' Impressions on the Importance and Relevance of the Research Problem to REPOA's Priorities

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Important and relevant	53
Not relevant	13
Not clearly articulated	34

4.3.5 Clarity in Stating the Objectives

The synthesis of the comments made by the different reviewers revealed the problems related to clarity in stating the objectives of a proposal as illustrated in Table 17 below. Less than one-third (29%) of the proposals submitted to REPOA clearly stated the objectives. The rest either did not clearly state the objectives or included many general objectives that obscured the intended research.

Table 17: Reviewers' Impressions On Clarity in Stating Objectives

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Clearly stated objectives	29
Not clearly stated	56
Too many and general	15

4.3.6 Appropriateness/Adequacy of Literature Review

As noted in the discussion of proposal introductions, a thorough review of literature is essential in order to identify the research gaps of the subject area, hence justify the proposed research. The reviewers' comments on the appropriateness and adequacy of literature review were synthesized and recorded in Table 18 below.

It is clear that proposal writers did not take literature review seriously. Only fourteen (14%) of authors adequately reviewed the appropriate literature. The large majority (86%) of authors did not. Problems identified include: inadequacy of literature reviewed (39%), lack of focus (16%), no review of literature at all (7%) and poor presentation of reviews (9%).

Table 18: Reviewers' Impressions on the Appropriateness/Adequacy of Literature Review

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Appropriate and adequate	14
Inappropriate	15
Inadequate	39
Not focused	16
No literature reviewed at all	7
Poor presentation	9

4.3.7 Relevance of Hypotheses

Problems related to writing hypotheses that are relevant to the proposed research topic and the subject matter in question were analysed next. Reviewers' comments were categorised and results are presented in Table 19 below.

It is clear that proposal authors face serious problems articulating comprehensible hypotheses. Less than one-fifth (18%) of the proposals in the sample adequately presented relevant hypotheses; 82% of the proposals did not. The problems noted included: inadequate presentation (2%), hypotheses not stated (22%), irrelevant hypotheses (17%) and lack of clearly formulated hypotheses (41%).

Table 19: Reviewers' Impressions on the Relevance of Hypotheses

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Hypotheses relevant and adequately presented	18
Hypotheses relevant but inadequately presented	2
Hypotheses not stated	22
Hypotheses stated are irrelevant	17
Hypotheses not clearly presented	41

4.3.8 Whether or not the Hypotheses are Testable

Reviewers' comments on whether hypotheses were testable are recorded in Table 20 below. As noted above, only 18% of proposals adequately presented relevant hypotheses (Table 19); it is considered likely that most of the hypotheses found to be testable would have been those found to be relevant. The majority of proposals (73%) presented hypotheses that were not testable.

Table 20: Reviewers' Impressions on Whether Hypotheses are Testable

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Hypotheses were testable	27
Hypotheses were not testable	73

4.3.9 Appropriateness of Methods and Research Instruments

A proposal must clearly and thoroughly state how the data will address the research problem to meet the stated objectives, and hence prove the research hypotheses. The methods and the research instruments chosen must be appropriate. Problems faced by authors on stating appropriate research methods were examined by analysing the reviewers comments. The results are as given in Table 21 below.

It is clear that the majority of the authors (72%) took the trouble to design appropriate research methods. However, clarity in the presentation was found to be a major problem; more than half (56 %) of reviewers' comments indicate appropriate methods were used but they were not clearly presented. Of the remaining authors, nearly one-quarter (23%) presented inappropriate methodologies, and a small but significant number of authors (5%) did not state any of the methods they were going to use. We are not sure whether this was due to negligence of authors, or to a lack of knowledge of what to write.

Table 21: Reviewers' Impressions on the Appropriateness of Methodologies

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Methods were appropriate	16
Methods were appropriate but not clearly presented/stated	56
Methods were not appropriate	23
Methods were not stated at all	5

4.3.10 Adequacy of Sampling Procedures

Standard research practice entails data collection on a sample basis. However, it is crucial that the sample is carefully selected to represent the population under study. Analysis of the reviewers' comments on the adequacy of sampling procedures is recorded in Table 22 below. It is curious to note that only 12% of the proposals presented satisfactorily explained sampling procedures. Half of the proposals reviewed did not have a satisfactory explanation of the sampling procedures. Furthermore 9% did not even present the sampling procedures to be used.

Table 22: Reviewers' Impressions on the Adequacy of Sampling Procedures

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Sampling procedures satisfactory	12
Sampling procedures not satisfactory	50
Sampling procedures not clearly explained	29
Sampling procedures not explained at all	9

4.3.11 Appropriateness of Data Analysis Techniques

The reviewers' impressions on the appropriateness of data analysis techniques are given in Table 23 below. This table shows that for the majority of the proposals (89%), the techniques for data analysis were not acceptable: of these 22% were not appropriate, 46% were not clearly stated and 21% did not include any data analysis techniques.

Table 23: Reviewers' Impressions on the Appropriateness of Data Analysis Techniques

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Appropriate	11
Not appropriate	22
Not clearly stated	46
Not stated	21

4.3.12 Quality of Text and Presentation

The quality of text and presentation of a document encompasses the organisation accuracy of material, the style of writing, and that correct language and grammar is used. Reviewers' comments on the quality of text and presentation are shown in Table 24 below. It was encouraging to note that over three-fifths (63%) of proposals had acceptable quality of texts and presentation. Poor text and presentation represented 34% and only 3% of proposals were submitted without being edited.

Table 24: Reviewers' Impressions on the Quality of Text and Presentation

Reviewers' Impressions	%
Very good/Good	43
Fairly good	20
Poor	34
Not edited	3

4.3.13 Omission of Critical Literature

In Section 3.2 we touched on the importance of a comprehensive review of literature in order to identify gaps and set out research problems, objectives, hypotheses and methods, this component being instrumental in guiding the research work. The analysis of the reviewers' impressions gave the results shown in Table 25 below. Over one-third (37%) of the proposals adequately covered the critical literature. The rest (63%) omitted the critical literature. Most likely this could be due to lack of knowledge or non-availability of such literature.

Table 25: Reviewers' Impressions on Omission of Critical Literature

Reviewers' Impressions	%
No omissions	24
Minor omissions	13
Major omissions	63

In the previous section we identified the problems and their nature based on the analysis of rating instruments that reflected reviewers impressions. In the next section views from authors of proposals will be presented.

4.4 Nature of Problems Based on Analysis of Questionnaire Responses

Table 26 below gives the results of the analysis of questionnaire responses from proposal writers. Findings indicate that the three most problematic aspects from the proposal writers' perspective were stating the research problem, articulating the importance of research problem to REPOA priorities and proposing appropriate methodology. Other problems are shown in ascending order in Table 26 below.

Table 26: Ranking of Problems¹⁰ from Proposal Writers' Perspective

Criteria	Mean	Standard Deviation
Stating research problem	5.27	3.795
Problem importance to REPOA priorities	5.33	4.586
Appropriate methodology	5.59	3.081
Testability of hypotheses	6.09	3.054
Relevance of hypotheses	6.23	4.011
Adequacy of sampling	6.43	3.385
Data analysis	6.77	3.927
Introducing proposal	6.91	3.829
Stating objectives	7.14	3.152

¹⁰ The lower the value of the mean the more severe the problem.

Reviewing literature	8.18	3.972
Formulating title	9.00	3.478
Capacity building	9.32	4.075
Good quality of text	11.50	1.970
Inclusion of references	11.68	3.358

Explanations given by the proposal writers for the problems identified were analysed and recorded in Table 27 below. The most common reasons given for problems were explained in terms of limited knowledge of proposal writing, inadequate instructions from REPOA on proposal writing, and the lack of understanding of the concept of poverty. As can be observed from Table 28 more than half (52%) of proposal writers who responded to the questionnaire chose limited knowledge in proposal writing as one of reasons why they faced problems in writing proposals. Other reasons were listed by only 13% of respondents or less.

Table 27: Reasons for Problems Encountered During Proposal Writing (Writers' Perspective)

Reasons/Explanations	%
Limited knowledge in proposal writing	52
Inadequate instructions from REPOA	13
Lack of understanding of the concept of poverty	13
Limited access to literature	9
Insufficient time for proposal writing	5
Inadequate resources	4
Others	5

Comparisons between Impressions of Proposal Reviewers and Writers

5.1 Reviewers Impressions of Problems as Compared to the Impressions of the Writer(s) of the Proposals

Table 28 below compares the results obtained from the analysis of reviewers' assessments using the proposal rating instrument completed by the reviewers as compared with the results obtained from the analysis of questionnaires filled out by the proposal writers.

For both reviewers and writers, the presentation of methodologies and the testability of hypotheses were listed among the five most serious problems encountered. However, the other major problem cited by reviewers - sampling procedure, literature review, and data analysis - differed from those noted by writers. The writers gave stating the research problem, linking the research problem to REPOA priorities, and stating relevant hypotheses as the most problematic areas in proposal writing.

Table 28: Comparison between Reviewers' and Proposal Writers' Impressions

Ranking	Reviewers' Impressions	Proposal Writers' Impressions
1	Is the sampling procedure satisfactory	Stating research problem
2	Is hypothesis testable	Problem importance to REPOA priorities
3	Is methodology appropriate	Appropriate methodology
4	Is the literature review appropriate/adequate?	Testability of hypotheses
5	Is/are the data analysis techniques adequate?	Relevance of hypotheses
6	Is/are the hypothesis(es) relevant?	Adequacy of sampling
7	Does the introduction provide justification?	Data analysis
8	Is the problem clearly presented?	Introducing proposal
9	Contribution to capacity building of juniors	Stating objectives
10	Is the title adequate?	Reviewing literature
11	Quality of text and presentation	Formulating title
12	Is/are the objectives clear?	Capacity building
13	Is problem Relevant to REPOA priorities?	Good quality of text
14	Does the bibliography omit any vital reference?	Inclusion of references

The observed discrepancy clearly indicates that the authors of proposals hold views that are different from those of assessors in as far as which aspects of proposal writing they found to be the most problematic. Therefore, a perception gap exists between the proposal reviewers and the proposal writers. This calls for an immediate action to bridge this gap through dialogue and possibly training of the proposal writers.

5.2 General Discussion

The aims of this study were to determine the acceptance rate of proposals submitted to REPOA, to establish the most common problems that resulted in proposals being rejected, to examine the nature of those problems, and to suggest possible ways to overcome the

identified problems. In this section some interesting issues arising out of the study will be discussed.

First, on the overall acceptance rate (Section 3) the observed low acceptance rates over the years need to be addressed. Researchers expected that the academic qualifications would have a bearing on the acceptance rates and that PhD holders would be in the lead in terms of having the highest acceptance rates compared to the authors with Masters or Basic degrees. However, Ph.D. holders led by a narrow margin over holders of Masters Degree. This gap may result because both PhD and Masters holders have all been involved at some stage in conducting research. Basic degree holders, on the other hand, had the lowest acceptance rate in comparison to the other two categories. This calls for strengthening of researchers at undergraduate level with training. This should result in more researchers capable of writing high quality, fundable proposals.

Secondly, on the issue of the most common problems in proposal writing, although both proposal writers and reviewers agree that such problems exist, their views differ on which of the problems are the most common (refer to Table 28). The difference of opinion between proposal writers and proposal reviewers may be explained in various ways. First, proposal writers view submissions from the input stage (the writing process) while the reviewers view proposals from the output stage (the writing product). If writers faced difficulties when writing some aspects of their proposals, they may have exerted greater effort on these areas. If such effort bear fruits and resulted in a better performance, proposal writers would still consider those aspects of the proposal as difficult, while the reviewers, having not seen the effort, but just the resulting improvement, may consider such areas as those where the proposal writer had experienced no problems. For example, proposal writers responded that 'stating the research problem' was the most problematic aspect, while this aspect was listed eighth by the reviewers of proposal. Similarly, the 'relevance of research problem to REPOA priorities' was listed as the second most problematic aspect by writers, while for reviewers it was thirteenth - one of the least problematic.

Conversely, aspects which reviewers viewed as problematic may be the ones where the proposal writers did not put in sufficient effort on these areas, leading to a poor review. For example, the 'reviewing of literature' was ranked as the fourth most problematic aspect of proposal writing by reviewers, but proposal writers ranked this as tenth. 'Sampling procedure' was ranked by reviewers as the most problematic aspect, while it was ranked sixth by proposal writers. The other explanation could be that proposal writers may also not be aware of the problems they face. This calls for a sensitisation and awareness raising activities for the writers. Additionally, it may also be helpful for proposal writers to access successful proposals in order to have an idea of what is expected of them.

Finally, certain problems were similarly ranked by reviewers and writers. Those areas where there was a similarity of views might also have the same explanation but differing implications. For example, when both proposal writers and reviewers (Table 28) ranked the inclusion or omission of vital references as the least problematic aspect (ranked 14th), one can simply take this as genuine acceptance of a shared view. However, as in the first case, proposal writers might have experienced difficulties with certain aspects and they dully exerted efforts, but, unlike the first case, their efforts did not produce positive results. Therefore, it is likely that both reviewers and writers would similarly rank that aspect as problematic. For example, both proposal writers and reviewers ranked the 'omission of vital references' as the least problematic aspect. Such a situation as this calls for training on proposal writing generally, with emphasis on aspects where proposal writers face problems. Again, the idea of potential proposal writers accessing successful proposals may also be useful to guide their writing of proposals. These issues will be taken up again when recommending a way forward in the next section.



Conclusion and the Way Forward

In conclusion we can confidently say that the results of this study clearly show that graduates are poorly equipped to write fundable proposals. Many shortfalls were identified that disqualify the proposals being submitted for funding.

The authors of sampled proposals were asked to propose a way forward to solving the problems they identified. Table 29 below summarises the responses. It is interesting to note in the table that training was ranked first, while other solutions highlighted were the ready availability of literature and the provision of clear instructions on how to write proposals.

Table 29: Suggested Solutions (by proposal writers) to Problems Encountered in Proposal Writing

Ranking	Suggested Solutions	%
1	Training of prospective proposal writers	53
2	Provision of Literature	15
3	Simplified and realistic instructions	11
4	Provision of resources	7
5	Provide more information on REPOA and the concept of poverty	6
6	Improve mentoring	6
7	Allow for more time	2

The first item that has been proposed, as a way forward is that concerns training of prospective proposal writers. This is a fundamental point that covers most of the other points raised in Table 29. It is however important to appreciate that training in research proposal writing cannot in any way be left solely in the hands of REPOA alone. REPOA is only a small institution with limited means that cannot possibly cater for the demands of the whole country. Therefore a broad-based solution to the problem must be developed. The premise of this recommendation is that REPOA receives proposals from prospective researchers from a big pool of graduates from institutions of higher learning. It would seem logical therefore that the bulk of the training must be linked with the training programmes in the universities. REPOA can only be expected to contribute with training where specialised training is required.

The problems that have been identified in this study are reflections of shortcomings in the basic training of the prospective researchers. The results point out towards the need to seriously re-examine how research is taught at the undergraduate level and even at postgraduate level. It is fairly evident that most graduates come out ill-equipped to write fundable proposals. This, however, is not surprising, because in the research methodology courses run by most of the institutions of higher learning, emphasise methodology. This is supported by the finding that the majority of the proposal writers in the study sample (73%) came up with appropriate methodological designs.

Clarity was however, the major problem. Most of the other aspects of proposal writing were also found to be problematic, indicating a general weakness that requires proactive strengthening. The results presented in this report also point out towards the need to strengthen research methods courses at the undergraduate level, to train potential proposal writers on proposal writing in general and in particular, for such training to focus on the most problematic aspects of proposal writing. There is also need for potential proposal writers to have access to successful proposals in order for them to have an idea of what constitutes a good proposal looks like. Additionally, there is need for comprehensive guidelines in the form of a proposal writing manual that can readily be accessed by prospective writers of proposals and for those involved in training trainers or researchers on proposal writing.

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Appendix 1

REPOA Proposal Rating Instrument

Title: _____

- Rating Codes: 0 = very weak
 1 = quite weak
 2 = average
 3 = quite good
 4 = very good

Criterion	Rating				
1. Is the title of the research adequate?	0	1	2	3	4
2. Is the introduction/background rich enough to provide justification for the study?	0	1	2	3	4
3. Is the research problem clearly presented?	0	1	2	3	4
4. Is the research problem important and relevant to REPOA priorities?	0	1	2	3	4
5. Is/Are the objective(s) of the research clear?	0	1	2	3	4
6. Is the literature review appropriate/adequate?	0	1	2	3	4
7. Is/Are the hypothesis(es) relevant?	0	1	2	3	4
8. Is/Are the hypothesis(es) testable?	0	1	2	3	4
9. Is the proposed methodology appropriate?	0	1	2	3	4
10. Is the sampling procedure satisfactory?	0	1	2	3	4
11. Is/Are data analysis technique(s) appropriate?	0	1	2	3	4
12. Quality of text, editing and presentation	0	1	2	3	4
13. Does the bibliography omit any vital references?	0	1	2	3	4
14. Contribution of the research process to capacity strengthening of junior researchers*	0	1	2	3	4
15. Average score given to the proposal	0	1	2	3	4

Proposal Recommended: _____
 Proposal Recommended with minor revisions: _____
 Proposal Recommended with major revisions (need guidance): _____
 Proposal Not Recommended: _____

Signature: _____

* Researchers (team composition)

Appendix 2

Questionnaire

You have been randomly selected from among many researchers who submitted proposals for possible funding from REPOA. Kindly spare a few minutes to respond to only three sets of questions.

1. Proposal assessment at REPOA uses a rating instrument which has 14 items covering different aspects of a proposal. This rating instrument is useful in establishing the quality of a proposal.

From your experience in proposal writing use the list of rating instrument below to rank from 1 to 14 aspects that you found most problematic starting with 1 as the 1st most problematic, 2 as the 2nd most problematic, 3 as the 3rd most problematic until you cover all the 14 aspects. If you like, the aspect that scores 14 will be the least difficult while 1 will be the most difficult.

- i) Selecting and refining the title of the research proposal to make it adequate _____
- ii) Making the introduction/background rich enough to provide justification for the study _____
- iii) Stating and presenting the research problem clearly _____
- iv) Making the research problem important and relevant to REPOA priorities _____
- v) Making the objective/s of the research clear _____
- vi) Reviewing the literature appropriately and adequately _____
- vii) Ensuring that the hypothesis(es) is/are relevant _____
- viii) Ensuring that the hypothesis(es) is/are testable _____
- ix) Designing the proposal methodology appropriately _____
- x) Ensuring that the sampling procedure is satisfactory _____
- xi) Making the data analysis technique(s) appropriate _____
- xii) Quality of text, editing and presentation _____
- xiii) Ensuring that the bibliography contains all vital references _____
- xiv) Enabling the research process contribute to capacity strengthening of junior researchers _____

1. Could you explain the nature of the problem(s) faced in each of the first 7 most problematic aspects that you have just ranked in question one above.

1st problematic aspect _____

2nd problematic aspect _____

3rd problematic aspect _____

4th problematic aspect _____

5th problematic aspect _____

6th problematic aspect _____

7th problematic aspect _____

2. Kindly provide ideas on how the performance in each of the aspects can be improved.

1st problematic aspect _____

2nd problematic aspect _____

3rd problematic aspect _____

4th problematic aspect _____

5th problematic aspect _____

6th problematic aspect _____

7th problematic aspect _____

Publications by REPOA

(The most recent publications are listed at the top of each category)

Books

"Researching Poverty in Tanzania: problems, policies and perspectives."

Edited by Idris Kikula, Jonas

Kipokola, Issa Shivji, Joseph Semboja and Ben Tarimo

"Local Perspectives on Globalisation: The African Case."

Edited by Joseph Semboja, Juma Mwapachu and Eduard Jansen

"Poverty Alleviation in Tanzania: Recent Research Issues"

Edited by M.S.D. Bagachwa

Research Reports

07.2 *"Financing Public Health Care: Insurance, User Fees or Taxes? Welfare Comparisons in Tanzania."*

Deograsias P. Mushi

07.1 *"Rice Production in the Maswa District, Tanzania and its Contribution to Poverty Alleviation."*

Jerry A. Ngailo, Abiud L. Kaswamila and Catherine J. Senkoro

06.3 *"The Contribution of Microfinance Institutions to Poverty Reduction in Tanzania."*

Severine S.A. Kessy and Fratern M. Urrio

06.2 *"The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Combating Soil Infertility and Poverty in the Usambara Mountains, Tanzania."*

Juma M. Wickama and Stephen T. Mwihomeke

06.1 *"Assessing Market Distortions Affecting Poverty Reduction Efforts on Smallholder Tobacco Production in Tanzania."*

Dennis Rweyemamu and Monica Kimaro

05.1 *"Changes in the Upland Irrigation System and Implications for Rural Poverty Alleviation. A Case of the Ndiwa Irrigation System, West Usambara Mountains, Tanzania."*

Cosmas H. Sokoni and
Tamilwai C. Shechambo

04.3 *"The Role of Traditional Irrigation Systems in Poverty Alleviation in Semi-Arid Areas: The Case of Chamazi in Lushoto District, Tanzania."*

Abiud L. Kaswamila and Baker M. Masuruli

04.2 *"Assessing the Relative Poverty of Clients and Non-clients of Non-bank Micro-finance Institutions. The case of the Dar es Salaam and Coast Regions."*

Hugh K. Fraser and Vivian Kazi

04.1 *"The Use of Sustainable Irrigation for Poverty Alleviation in Tanzania. The Case of Smallholder Irrigation Schemes in Igurusi, Mbarali District."*

Shadrack Mwakallila and Christine Noe

03.7 *"Poverty and Environment: Impact analysis of Sustainable Dar es Salaam Project on "Sustainable Livelihoods" of Urban Poor"*

M.A.M. Victor and A.M.P. Makalle

- 03.6 *“Access to Formal and Quasi-Formal Credit by Smallholder Farmers and Artisanal Fishermen: A Case of Zanzibar”*
Khalid Mohamed
- 03.5 *“Poverty and Changing Livelihoods of Migrant Maasai Pastoralists in Morogoro and Kilosa Districts”*
C. Mung'ong'o and D. Mwamfupe
- 03.4 *“The Role of Tourism in Poverty Alleviation in Tanzania”*
Nathanael Luvanga and Joseph Shitundu
- 03.3 *“Natural Resources Use Patterns and Poverty Alleviation Strategies in the Highlands and Lowlands of Karatu and Monduli Districts - A Study on Linkages and Environmental Implications”*
Pius Zebbe Yanda and Ndalakwa Faustin Madulu
- 03.2 *“Shortcomings of Linkages Between Environmental Conservation and Poverty Alleviation in Tanzania”*
Idris S. Kikula, E.Z. Mnzava and Claude Mung'ong'o
- 03.1 *“School Enrolment, Performance, Gender and Poverty (Access to Education) in Mainland Tanzania”*
A.V.Y. Mbelle and J. Katabaro
- 02.3 *“Poverty and Deforestation around the Gazetted Forests of the Coastal Belt of Tanzania”*
Godius Kahyarara, Wilfred Mbowe and Omari Kimweri
- 02.2 *“The Role of Privatisation in Providing the Urban Poor Access to Social Services: the Case of Solid Waste Collection Services in Dar es Salaam”*
Suma Kaare
- 02.1 *“Economic Policy and Rural Poverty in Tanzania: A Survey of Three Regions”*
Longinus Rutasitara
- 01.5 *“Demographic Factors, Household Composition, Employment and Household Welfare”*
S.T. Mwisomba and B.H.R. Kiilu
- 01.4 *“Assessment of Village Level Sugar Processing Technology in Tanzania”*
A.S. Chungu, C.Z.M. Kimambo and T.A.L. Bali
- 01.3 *“Poverty and Family Size Patterns: Comparison Across African Countries”*
C. Lwechungura Kamuzora
- 01.2 *“The Role of Traditional Irrigation Systems (Vinyungu) in Alleviating Poverty in Iringa Rural District”*
Tenge Mkavidanda and Abiud Kaswamila
- 01.1 *“Improving Farm Management Skills for Poverty Alleviation: The Case of Njombe District”*
Aida Isinika and Ntengua Mdoe
- 00.5 *“Conservation and Poverty: The Case of Amani Nature Reserve”*
George Jambiya and Hussein Sosovele
- 00.4 *“Poverty and Family Size in Tanzania: Multiple Responses to Population Pressure?”*
C.L. Kamuzora and W. Mkanta
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- LGR 9 *Are fees the major barrier to accessing public health care?*
- LGR 8 *Primary education since the introduction of the Primary Education Development Plan*
- LGR 7 *Citizens' access to information on local government finances*
- LGR 6 *Low awareness amongst citizens of local government reforms*
- LGR 5 *Fees at the dispensary level: Is universal access being compromised?*
- LGR 4 *TASAF - a support or an obstacle to local government reform*
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